

forget we are a nation at war and are asking a great deal of the men and women in our Armed Forces as well as their families. Democrats want to ensure that all of our Nation's reservists have access to quality health care. Democrats will try to make certain that no veteran has to choose between his disability pay and his retirement pay. We will seek to provide additional resources to end the lengthy waits at VA hospitals that are a fact of life for too many of our veterans today.

It is also our hope that this session will allow us the opportunity early on to address a good energy bill. I have said on several occasions, should the MTBE liability immunity provisions be stricken from the provisions in the energy bill, there would be sufficient votes to pass it on the Senate floor. The decision is up to the majority.

It is also our goal this year to pass the Mental Health Parity Act, welfare reform reauthorization, and the legislation to outlaw hate crimes.

As I said, we hope we can do this and much more on a bipartisan basis.

It is with sadness that I note the way the last session ended. The majority didn't seek consensus or cooperation of the Democratic caucus on either the Medicare bill or the energy legislation. It was a process designed to find agreement among those who already agreed not to bridge the differences or broaden support. It was marked by procedural abuses.

Many Americans are still dismayed that the House kept the Medicare vote open for 3 hours while one Member actually admitted he was offered a bribe from another Member on the House floor to support the bill. That isn't how the American people expect us to do their work. We can do better. This year we must.

While I am on matters that cause Democrats very grave concern, I am compelled to note the onerous recess appointment of Judge Charles Pickering. The President could not have started off this session of Congress in a worse way. The Senate has repeatedly rejected this nomination. The timing, during the Martin Luther King, Jr., weekend, also could not have been worse. It was a deplorable decision and one that is deeply regrettable on several levels.

As we begin this session, our first order of business will be the consideration of the Omnibus appropriations bill. The Omnibus appropriations bill was once a good bill. In the Senate we were able to work out compromises. We accomplished many things and the process worked. But the administration intervened at the eleventh hour and demanded changes, laid down an ultimatum, and even forced the conference to take positions in direct conflict with earlier positions taken on rollcall votes in both the House and the Senate.

Its insistence on provisions affecting the mad cow decision, overtime regulations, and media concentration made

the bill unsupportable to many Senators. We should take the time to fix the bill's problems because they affect millions of American families. We owe it to them to take the time to do it right.

I take a moment for some additional comments on matters unrelated to our legislative agenda. First, I know I speak for all Senators in expressing praise for our troops in Iraq for their inspiring demonstration of bravery and patriotism. Nearly 500 soldiers have died and 3,000 have been wounded since the war began. Our country owes them our debt of gratitude. I am particularly mindful of the sacrifices made by thousands of South Dakotans, including 800 who departed for Iraq during the recent holiday season.

Recently, I attended a funeral for Chris Soelzer, a young man from Sturgis who lost his life in Iraq on Christmas Eve. He was a remarkable role model, a leader, and soldier. The agony felt by his family, friends, and his community is another poignant reminder of the horrific sacrifice that war demands.

We honor those who are there and express our heartfelt gratitude for the job they continue to do under the most difficult of circumstances. While we praise them for finding Saddam Hussein and for continuing the effort to ensure democracy for the 23 million people of Iraq, we remain concerned that our troops face violent attacks daily and our troops and our taxpayers are bearing a disproportionate share of the burden.

Second, I note the decision made by our colleague, Senator JOHN BREAUX, to retire at the end of this session. I have had the good fortune to work with Senator BREAUX now for 25 years, 17 in the Senate. I am proud to call him a close friend.

He will leave the Senate with many accomplishments, many admirers, and many good friends. He has earned our respect and affection by his manner, his work, and his never-ending desire to seek consensus and bipartisan achievement. For that reason, he will also leave a hole in this institution, one that will be very hard to fill. We thank JOHN BREAUX for his service to his country, his remarkable leadership, and his friendship. I wish Lois and JOHN well in the months and years ahead.

In the spirit of JOHN BREAUX, let me close by reiterating our desire to work in a constructive, bipartisan way for legislation that will truly create an "opportunity society" for all Americans. I look forward to the coming months and the challenges that we will confront as they unfold.

I yield the floor.

AGRICULTURE, RURAL DEVELOPMENT, FOOD AND DRUG ADMINISTRATION, AND RELATED AGENCIES APPROPRIATIONS ACT, 2004—CONFERENCE REPORT

The PRESIDENT pro tempore. Under the previous order, the Senate will resume consideration of H.R. 2673, which the clerk will report.

The assistant legislative clerk read as follows:

A conference report to accompany H.R. 2673 to make appropriations for agriculture, rural development, Food and Drug Administration, and related agencies for the fiscal year ending September 30, 2004, and for other purposes.

RECESS

Mr. REID. Mr. President, with the two leaders having spoken, I ask unanimous consent we recess now for our luncheons.

The PRESIDENT pro tempore. Without objection, it is so ordered.

Under the previous order, the Senate will now stand in recess until the hour of 2:15 p.m.

Thereupon, the Senate, at 12:24 p.m., recessed until 2:16 p.m. and reassembled when called to order by the Presiding Officer (Mr. VOINOVICH).

AGRICULTURE, RURAL DEVELOPMENT, FOOD AND DRUG ADMINISTRATION, AND RELATED AGENCIES APPROPRIATIONS ACT, 2004—CONFERENCE REPORT—Continued

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Under the previous order, the time between 2:15 p.m. and 2:50 p.m. shall be equally divided for debate only.

Who yields time?

The Senator from Alaska.

Mr. STEVENS. Mr. President, the time is equally divided between now and 2:50; is that correct?

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator is correct.

Mr. REID. Mr. President, if the Senator would yield, why 2:50? I have missed something. That is fine. That means we have about 15 minutes.

Mr. STEVENS. Seventeen minutes apiece.

Mr. REID. On this side, if it is OK, I will yield 5 minutes to Senator KENNEDY, 5 minutes to Senator JACK REED, and 5 minutes to Senator JOHNSON.

Mr. STEVENS. I thank the Senator.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Alaska.

Mr. STEVENS. Mr. President, I apologize for my voice. I hope I can keep it long enough to make this statement.

Republicans and Democrats worked together to adopt this omnibus conference report that is before the Senate today. It contains seven appropriations bills. It was my hope that the Senate would pass this bill last December, and it was a great disappointment to me that we did not pass it then.